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JACK ANDERSON and DALE VAN ATTA

Iran's Terrorism Role Underestimated

The menacing visage of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is looming ever larger in the deliberations of experts trying to identify those responsible for the terrorist assaults on the Rome and Vienna airports that left six Americans dead last December.

At the time, President Reagan angrily blamed Libya's volatile Muammar Qaddafi. But U.S. intelligence agencies have received information from usually reliable sources that Abu Nidal, the renegade Palestinian who heads the group that committed the attacks, used Iran as a planning and training center for the operation.

What makes this development so significant—and so alarming for the United States—is that Nidal's protector and supporter for years has been Iran's blood enemy, Iraq. At one time, Iraq was bankrolling Nidal (real name: Sabri Banna) and his group to the tune of \$23 million or more a year.

But then, as part of the U.S. attempt to lure Iraq out of the Soviet orbit with arms supplies and other aid, the State Department prevailed on Iraq to drop its support of Nidal. The selling point was that forcing Nidal to move his headquarters from Iraq might remove Iraq from the list of terrorist nations ineligible for U.S. aid.

Unfortunately, the pressure seems to have worked—sending Nidal into Khomeini's arms.

Nidal was once part of the most militant wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization. He was associated with Black September, the group that committed, among other outrages, the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

At about that time, Nidal split with PLO chief Yasser Arafat, and in 1974 a PLO court tried him in absentia and sentenced him to death. Ever since, Arafat and Nidal have tried to get each other assassinated.

Meanwhile, Nidal has carved a path of murder and mayhem across the Middle East and Europe. His usual assassination targets have been moderate Arabs, particularly PLO diplomats.

The Reagan administration blamed Libya as an accomplice in the Dec. 27 twin airport attacks. But the evidence points more to Iran and Syria. The two four-man teams of terrorists got training and operational planning in the Bekka Valley of eastern Lebanon, an area controlled by Syria and patrolled by Iranian revolutionary guards.

Interrogation by Italian intelligence of the lone surviving terrorist in the Rome attack confirmed that some of the teams' training took place in Iran, as well as the Bekka and that the attackers entered Italy via Syria.

Our sources in Iran report that Nidal has spent extended periods of time since September at the Iranian terrorist training camp in Manzariyeh Park. One trusted CIA source said Nidal stayed as long as a week on at least half-a-dozen occasions before the airport attacks. His escort on these visits was Khomeini's son, Ahmad.

Several U.S. intelligence officials now say that Iran (and Syria) bear more blame for the attacks than Libya. If Nidal has indeed become a lackey of Khomeini, it means he may shift his attention from old scores against the PLO to new ones against the United States.